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U.S. Department
of Transportation

**United States
Coast Guard**

Visual Distress Signals for Recreational Boaters

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This pamphlet is directed primarily to recreational boaters, but the requirements discussed also apply to operators of vessels engaged in the carrying of six or fewer passengers. The Visual Distress Signal requirements for most commercial vessels are in Title 46 of the Code of Federal Regulations.

You may obtain further boating safety information by writing:

U.S. Coast Guard (G-BBS)
Washington, D.C.
20593

Visual Distress Signals
I. The Regulation

The requirement to carry visual distress signals became effective on January 1, 1981. This regulation requires all boats when used on coastal waters, which includes the Great Lakes, the territorial seas and those waters directly connected to the Great Lakes and the territorial seas, up to a point where the waters are less than two miles wide, and boats owned in the United States when operating on the high seas to be equipped with visual distress signals.

The only exceptions are during daytime (sunrise to sunset) for:

- Recreational boats less than 16 feet in length
- Boats participating in organized events such as races, regattas or marine parades.
- Open sailboats not equipped with propulsion machinery and less than 26 feet in length.
- Manually propelled boats.

These boats only need to carry night signals when used on these waters at night.

"PYROTECHNIC VISUAL DISTRESS SIGNALING DEVICES" must be Coast Guard approved, in serviceable condition and stowed to be readily accessible. If they are marked with a date showing the serviceable life, this date must not have passed. Launchers produced before Jan. 1, 1981, intended for use with approved signals are not required to be Coast Guard Approved.

USCG Approved Pyrotechnic Visual Distress Signals and Associated Devices include:

- Pyrotechnic red flares, hand held or aerial.
- Pyrotechnic orange smoke, hand held or floating.
- Launchers for aerial red meteors or parachute flares.

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The purpose of the new regulation is to assure that boaters have a way of attracting attention and securing assistance should the need arise. Properly used visual distress signals will also help reduce the time it takes to locate a boat in difficulty when a search is underway. This will reduce the possibility of a minor emergency becoming a tragedy.

"NON—PYROTECHNIC VISUAL DISTRESS SIGNALING DEVICES" must carry the manufacturer's certification that they meet Coast Guard requirements. They must be in serviceable condition and stowed to be readily accessible.

This group includes:

- Orange distress flag.
- Electric distress light.

No single signaling device is ideal under all conditions and for all purposes. Consideration should therefore be given to carrying several types. For example, an aerial flare can be seen over a long distance on a clear night, but for closer work, a hand-held flare may be more useful.

II. *Visual Distress Signals* Types

A wide variety of signaling devices, both pyrotechnic and non-pyrotechnic, can be carried to meet the requirements of the regulation.

Recreational boats less than 16′ operating in coastal waters, and certain other exempted boats listed on page 1, need only carry night signaling devices when operated at night. All other boats must carry both night and day signaling devices.

Note: If pyrotechnic devices are selected, a minimum of three must be carried. Any combination can be carried as long as they add up to three signals for day use and three signals for night use. Three day/night signaling devices meet both requirements.

The following is an illustration of the variety and combination of devices which can be carried in order to meet the requirements:

1. Three hand-held red flares (day and night).
2. One electric distress light (night only).

3. One hand-held red flare and two parachute flares (day and night).
4. One hand-held orange smoke signal, two floating orange smoke signals (day) and one electric distress light (night only).

Number Marked on Device	Device Description
	DAY USE ONLY
160.022	Floating Orange Smoke Distress Signals (5 minutes)
160.037	Hand Held Orange Smoke Distress Signals
160.057	Floating Orange Smoke Distress Signals (15 minutes)
160.072	Orange Distress Signal Flag for Boats
	NIGHT USE ONLY
161.013	Electric Distress Light for Boats
	DAY AND NIGHT USE
160.021	Hand Held Flare Distress Signal (These signals must have a date of October 1, 1980 or later to be acceptable.
160.024	Parachute Red Flare Distress Signals (37mm) (These signals require use in combination with a suitable launching device.
160.036	Hand Held Rocket-Propelled Parachute Red Flare Distress Signals.
160.066	Distress Signal for Boats, Red Aerial Pyrotechnic Flare (These devices may be either meteor or parachute assisted type.) Some of these signals may require use in combination with a suitable launching device.

Warning . . .

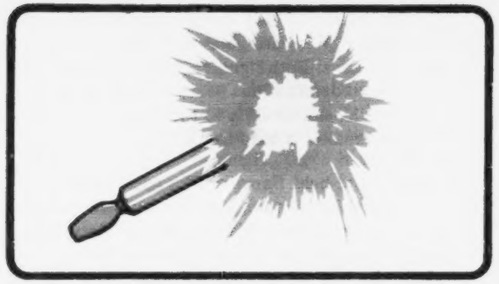
In some states the pistol launcher for meteors and parachute flares may be considered a firearm. Therefore, check with your state authorities before acquiring such launcher.

The number specified is the minimum required for a reasonable likelihood of attracting necessary attention. Prudent boaters may carry additional emergency signaling devices to meet their particular boating needs.

All distress signaling devices have both advantages and disadvantages. The most popular, because of cost, are probably the smaller pyrotechnic devices. Pyrotechnics make excellent distress signals, universally recognized as such, but they have the drawback that they can be used only once. Additionally, there is a potential for both injury and property damage if not properly handled. Pyrotechnics devices have a very hot flame, and the ash and slag can cause burns and ignite material that burns easily. Projected devices, such as pistol launched and hand-held parachute flares and meteors, have many of the same characteristics of a firearm and must be handled with the same caution and respect.

The hand-held and the floating orange smoke signaling devices are good day signals, especially on clear days. Both signals are most effective with light to moderate winds because higher winds tend to keep the smoke close to the water and disperse it which makes it hard to see.

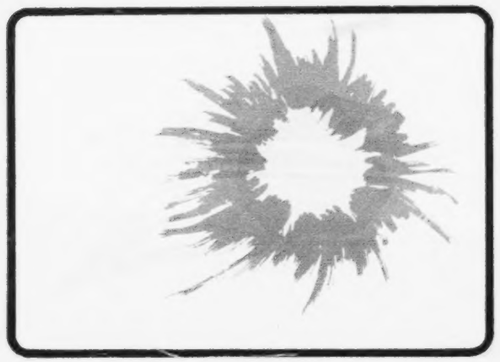
Red hand-held flares can be used by day, but are most effective at night or in restricted visibility such as fog or haze. Only hand-held flares made after 1 October 1980 will be approved by the Coast Guard for use on recreational boats. When selecting such flares look for the Coast Guard approval number and date of manufacture. Make sure that the device does not carry the marking: "Not approved for use on recreational boats."



Note:

Hand-held pyrotechnic devices, such as flares and smoke signals, may expel ash and slag as they burn. Even though these particles cool quickly, they can cause painful burns or ignite materials that burn easily. The flare itself is very hot and can start a fire if it is dropped. Therefore, these devices when burning should be held over the side and in such a way that hot slag can not drip on the hand.

Pistol launched or self contained rocket propelled red meteors can be used by day, but are most effective at night. Because of their rapid descent they are less affected by wind than are slower descending signals. However, the burning time is also shorter and they may therefore not be as readily observed as are slower descending signals.



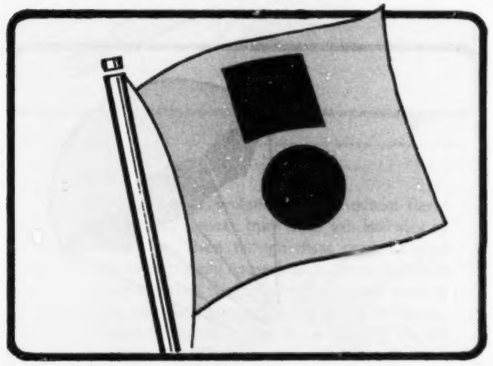
Red parachute flares, either pistol launched or hand-held rocket propelled, are good distress signals for both day and night because of their altitude, slow descent and brilliant intensity. Their slow descent, however, makes them drift with the wind which can lead a would-be rescuer away from the disabled vessel.

Whenever a pistol or hand-held rocket propelled distress signal is used, the wind must be taken into account. In calm winds keep your arm at approximately 60 degrees above the horizon with the wind at your back when firing the device. As the wind increases, increase the angle of the arm up to but no more than about 80 to 85 degrees. No pyrotechnic device should be fired straight up or in such a direction that it may land on your boat or another boat or on land and cause a fire.

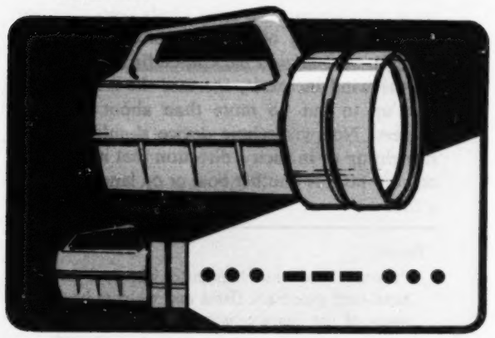
Note:

Projected devices such as pistol launched and hand-held parachute flares and meteors have many of the characteristics of a firearm and must be handled with the same caution and respect.

The distress flag must be at least 3 x 3 feet with a black square and ball on an orange background. It is accepted as a day signal only and is especially effective in bright sunlight. The flag is most distinctive when waved on something such as a paddle or a boathook or flown from a mast.



The electric distress light is accepted for night use only and must automatically flash the international SOS distress signal, which is three short flashes, three long flashes, and three short flashes. (. . . — — — . . .). Flashed four to six times each minute, this is an unmistakable distress signal, well known to most boaters. The device can be checked any time for serviceability if shielded from view.



NOTE: An ordinary flashlight is not acceptable since it must be manually flashed and does not normally produce enough candle power.

Visual Distress Signals
III. When and How to Use Them

The Regulation States:

"No person in a boat shall display a visual distress signal on water to which this subpart applies under any circumstances except a situation where assistance is needed because of immediate or potential danger to the persons aboard."

Visual distress signals are part of your boat's safety equipment. Check them before you leave harbor. Their intended purpose is to summon help should the need arise. Visual distress signals can only be effective when someone is in a position to see them. Therefore, when employing pyrotechnic devices, do so only when you see or hear a boat or airplane or you are reasonably sure that someone on shore is in position to see your signal and take action. Good judgment is an essential part of successful use of visual distress signals.

The unwritten law of the sea requires that a mariner comes to the aid of a mariner in distress. Therefore, should you see a distress signal, immediate and positive action should be taken. Notify the nearest Coast Guard station or State authority by radio. Channel 9 on CB and Channel 16 on VHF marine radio (156.8 MHz) are recognized distress channels. If you can assist the striken vessel without endangering yourself, you should. The Federal Boat Safety Act of 1971 contains a "Good Samaritan" clause stating: "Any person . . . who gratuitously and in good faith renders assistance at the scene of a vessel collision, accident, or other casualty without objection of any person assisted, shall not be held liable for any act or omission in providing or arranging salvage, towage, medical treatment, or other assistance where the assisting person acts as an ordinary, reasonably prudent man would have acted under the same or similar circumstances."

Visual Distress Signals
IV. Handling and Storage

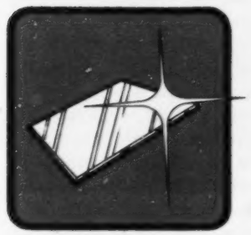
Pyrotechnic devices should be stored in a cool, dry location and must be readily accessible in case of an emergency. Care should be taken to prevent puncturing or otherwise damaging their coverings. A watertight container, such as a surplus ammunition box, painted red or orange and prominently marked "DISTRESS SIGNALS" is recommended.

If young children are frequently aboard your boat, careful selection and proper stowage of visual distress signals become especially important. If you elect to carry pyrotechnic devices, you should select those in a tough packaging and not easy to ignite should the devices fall into the hands of children.

Coast Guard approved pyrotechnic devices carry an expiration date. This date can not exceed 42 months from the date of manufacture and at such time the device can no longer be counted towards the minimum requirements.

Visual Distress Signals
V. Other Than Approved

In addition to those signals listed in this pamphlet which are approved by the Coast Guard or meet Coast Guard specifications, there are a number of other signals that have been traditionally used by mariners in distress. These signals can be carried and used, but can not replace those signals prescribed by regulations.



Signal Mirror

Fog Horn

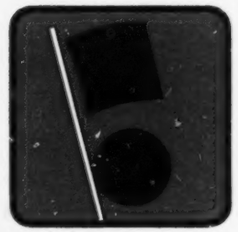
"Mayday" by Radio

Dye Marker (Any Color)

Code Flags November-Charlie

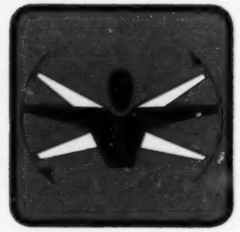
Emergency Radio Beacon

Gun Fired at Intervals of 1 min.



Square Flag and Ball

Fire in Bucket



Wave Arms

VI. Visual Distress Signals Helpful Hints

The boat operator is responsible for the boat and persons onboard. Prudence and common sense will go a long way to prevent the need to use visual distress signals by ensuring that the boat and operator are in condition to undertake the trip in safety.

GOOD HOUSEKEEPING—There are few places where good housekeeping is more important than afloat. This includes properly stowing and securing all equipment and supplies, keeping decks and spaces clean and free from clutter and trash, performing safety checks and required maintenance on a regular schedule and ensuring that all repairs are properly made.

TOOLS AND SPARE PARTS—Carry a few tools and some spare parts and learn how to make minor repairs. A great many rescue cases are caused by minor breakdowns which the operator should have been able to repair.

FUEL MANAGEMENT—Use the "One-third rule" in fuel management. Use one-third of the fuel to go, one-third to get back and keep one-third in reserve.

ALCOHOL AND DRUGS—Alcohol and other drugs reduce judgment and the ability to react. Futhermore, sun, wind, vibration and noise are very fatiguing, increasing the debilitating effects of alcohol and drugs.

FLOAT PLAN—By telling someone where you are going and when you will be back, what your boat looks like and other identifying information you will make finding your boat much easier, should the need arise.

FLOAT PLAN

1. NAME OF PERSON AND TELEPHONE NUMBER.
2. DESCRIPTION OF BOAT. TYPE _____ COLOR _____
   TRIM _____ REGISTRATION NO. _____
   LENGTH _____ NAME _____ MAKE _____
   OTHER INFO. _____
3. PERSONS ABOARD _____

NAME	AGE	ADDRESS & TELE. NO.

4. ENGINE TYPE _____ H.P. _____
   NO. OF ENGINES _____ FUEL CAPACITY _____
5. SURVIVAL EQUIPMENT: (CHECK AS APPROPRIATE)
   PFD's: _____ FLARES _____ MIRROR _____
   SMOKE SIGNALS _____ FLASHLIGHT _____ FOOD _____
   PADDLES _____ WATER _____ OTHERS _____
6. RADIO YES/NO TYPE _____ FREQS. _____
7. TRIP EXPECTATIONS: LEAVE AT _____ (TIME)
   FROM _____ GOING TO _____
   EXPECT TO RETURN BY _____ (TIME) AND IN
   NO EVENT LATER THAN _____
8. ANY OTHER PERTINENT INFO. _____
9. AUTOMOBILE LICENSE _____ TYPE _____
   TRAILER LICENSE _____ COLOR AND MAKE OF
   AUTO _____
   WHERE PARKED _____
10. IF NOT RETURNED BY _____ (TIME) CALL THE
    COAST GUARD, OR _____ (LOCAL AUTHORITY)
    TELEPHONE NUMBERS _____

For more information on Boating Safety, contact your local State Boating Official or, U.S. Coast Guard Director of Auxiliary:

150 Causeway St.
BOSTON, MA 02114

Otis Air Force Base
FALMOUTH, MA 02542

FOB Rm. 668
ST. PAUL, MN 55111

4335 River Road
CINCINNATI, OH 45204

1430 Olive Street
ST. LOUIS, MO 63103

210 No. Tucker Blvd.
ST. LOUIS, MO 63101

1730 West End Ave.
NASHVILLE, TN 37203

Governors Island
NEW YORK, NY 10004

Bldg. 2, GSA Depot
SCOTIA, NY 12303

Tanner Park
COPIAGUE, NY 11726

King and Cumberland Sts.
GLOUCESTER CITY, NY 08030

P.O. Box 782
HARRISBURG, PA 17108

431 Crawford Street
PORTSMOUTH, VA 23705

USCG Yard Bldg. 70
CURTIS BAY, BALT. MD 21226

51 SW First Ave.
MIAMI, FL 33130

Hale Boggs FOB
NEW ORLEANS, LA 70130

1240 E. 9th St.
CLEVELAND, OH 44199

Bldg. 401
Niagara Falls International Airport
NIAGARA FALLS, NY 14304

Box 480 Castle Station
Warren & E. Genesee Sts.
SAGINAW, MI 48606

2420 S. Lincoln Memorial Dr.
MILWAUKEE, WI 53207

400 Ocean Gate Blvd.
LONG BEACH, CA 90822

630 Sansome St.
SAN FRANCISCO, CA 94126

915 Second Avenue
SEATTLE, WA 98174

300 Ala Moana Blvd.
HONOLULU, HI 96813

Federal Bldg.
P.O. Box 3-5000
JUNEAU, AK 99801